

# LANGUAGE AND LITERACY *News*

*The Newsletter of the United Kingdom Reading Association*

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## Editorial

We hope you will agree that this is a fairly packed edition of *Language and Literacy News*. It is arriving a little later than we anticipated but we hope you will find it worth waiting for.

The range of articles in this edition demonstrates once again the concept of the Association as a forum for debate. Probably even if we tried we could not get members to agree entirely on issues in the teaching of literacy. We see this a strength of the Association rather than a weakness.

As you will read, UKRA are venturing onto the "information superhighway", thanks to Colin Harrison (see page 7). Talk to you on the 'Net!

# UKRA

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Material for the next edition of *Language and Literacy News* should reach the editors by February 4th, 1995

Please send to Jane Medwell and David Wray, Lydford House, 104 Fore Street, Heavitree, Exeter, EX2 2RS

# Specific learning difficulties: current practice and results

Pamela Heather

The number of students who fail to gain one GCSE result suggests all is not well with our teaching practice. It should lead us to question the current teaching methods for pupils with specific learning difficulties:

- has the teaching practice adopted for these pupils been based on pure belief and exhortation, without argument and supporting evidence?

- are schools and special needs' teachers steadily promoting teaching methods and practice, which result in failure or underachievement in written language for many pupils?

Every year four out of 10 children leave school with no academic passes - a total of 262,400, the worst performance of any industrial country. There is no doubt that current teaching methods have not addressed the problems that some students have with written language.

## System failure

The Adult Literacy and Basic Skills Unit (ALBSU) says that around 13 per cent of adults and youngsters over 16 have serious difficulties in reading and writing. A survey of the literacy levels of 10,000 students from 12 colleges has been undertaken. The results showed that one in three needed extra help if they were to gain a qualification. A further one in twenty needed "considerable help" if they were to gain a qualification. There are some six million people, who, despite the millions of pounds spent on special needs in this country, have not responded well to the current teaching methods. It appears our education system is failing those with specific learning difficulties. It will continue to fail them unless we understand why they are failing.

## The school working day

Pupils with specific learning difficul-

ties (dysgraphia, dyspraxia and dyslexia and any other neurological dysfunction) suffer great hardship during a school day. Do we truly understand what they have to go through? These pupils are expected to make good progress in school and with homework, as if they have no real problems. The real problems are the cause of their failure, and they are suggested, as follows:

### Vision and reading

- \* cannot read aloud because of the condition of verbal alexia.
- \* books cannot be accurately read at speed. Reading comprehension cannot be accurately gained to write down the correct answer or understand even a mathematical question.
- \* a proofreading skill cannot be put into practice.

### Written language:

- \* when writing down a sentence the recall order of written letters and words may be inaccurate, and because a proofreading skill cannot be carried out the errors cannot be detected.
- \* the speed of handwriting is greatly impeded because spellings are so slowly recalled.
- \* illegible handwriting cannot be used for studying purposes or be accurately marked.

### Visual recall and spelling:

- \* taking down dictation has to be abandoned because of slow spelling recall or slow handwriting, or both.
- \* the first three or four letters of a word are usually incorrectly spelled and so a dictionary cannot be used, or it is too time consuming to find a word.
- \* the process of writing is very debilitating and stressful. The length of time spent on copying or completing written work has to be curtailed because of fatigue.

### Movement:

- \* co-ordination problems exist and so physical activities are not easily carried out and are poorly performed.

### Problem identification

What do the numbers of those who fail in education mean? One suggestion is that current teaching methods are just supporting learning difficulty. Another is that current teaching practice is not

changing the functional ability of students - how well can they carry out a basic skill, and how well can they remember it. Finally, the numbers suggest teachers are faced with an educational dilemma. They can easily identify pupils who are likely to fail in education, but the methods they use do not appear to reach the source of the pupils' problems. This has to be so since improvements are so slowly gained. Parents may request the involvement of a school psychologist. The psychologist's report can highlight problems of mental ability, but it cannot guide the specifics of instruction for the teacher in the classroom. Dissatisfaction then leads many parents to try alternative methods outside the educational system. These problems need to be resolved for teachers.

### Research projects

The true cost of tutoring specific learning difficulties in this country is not known; an audit would discover exactly how much it is costing the nation. We do not know how much tuition is arranged privately for pupils in mainstream education and private education. The addition of private tuition to the expenditure for special needs could be a staggering figure. Research is also needed for evaluating new methods, to settle the controversy about them.

### The way ahead

Some academics do not expect to counter severe degrees of learning difficulty. They say that pupils with specific learning difficulties have a lifelong condition. These pupils have an average or above average IQ - should we accept that nothing can be done to help them? We will fail them if we continue with the teaching methods we have and look no further. The symptoms of difficulty observed in written work are not the real problem. Real problems are those that prevent, impair or delay learning. There is a great need to investigate alternative ways of resolving children's real problems.

The problems are here to stay unless we do something about them.

